

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 000810

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PGOV PINR PM LABOR HUMAN RIGHTSPOLMIL

SUBJECT: PANAMA'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN: ALEMAN MAY BE COUNTING ON THE AZUERO, BUT IT IS NOT MUCH TO COUNT

Summary

¶11. (U) PolOffs recently toured Panama's Herrera and Los Santos provinces, meeting with Herrera's Electoral Tribunal Regional Director Hector Paulette, Arnulfista Party legislative challenger Pacifico Escalona and Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) Herrera elections coordinator Reynaldo Salerno. Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso, native daughter of Pedasi, Los Santos, has spent nearly every weekend during her term in the region, making it an even greater Arnulfista stronghold than before. Arnulfista legislative candidates should win at least three seats out of the two provinces' six. If Arnulfista legislative candidates do well in the May 2 general elections, Arnulfista presidential candidate Jose Miguel Alemán could eke out a win in the Azuero. Many voters will vote Arnulfista for legislature but could choose PRD presidential candidate Martin Torrijos for president.

Background

¶12. (U) Among Panama's smallest provinces, Herrera and Los Santos (on the country's southwestern Azuero peninsula), only account for 4.0% and 3.5% of the national electorate, respectively. In this rugged, cattle ranching part of the country, Panama's Liberal parties (in the European sense) have traditionally won at the polls. These include the Arnulfista Party and the National Liberal Republican Movement (MOLIRENA). Speaking with local Latino farmers, an observer notes continued animosity toward deceased dictator General Omar Torrijos' long-past, heavy-handed policies. His Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) is popular only in isolated pockets. In 1999, Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso, native daughter of Pedasi, Los Santos, won the Azuero by a whopping 11,248 votes, running against native son PRD presidential candidate (then and now) Martin Torrijos from Chitre, Herrera. Three of the region's legislators are Arnulfistas; two are PRD; and one is from the Solidarity Party. Each province has three legislators.

Reverse Coattails

¶13. (SBU) PolOffs met with Arnulfista legislative challenger Pacifico Escalona (former Governor of Herrera and brother of Minister of Government and Justice (MOGJ) Arnulfo Escalona), who is running against Solidarity legislative incumbent Alberto Magno Castillero. According to Menalco Solis, campaign manager for Solidarity's presidential candidate Guillermo Endara, Castillero is popular in the circuit, and Solidarity is counting on him to win. However, the Arnulfistas' Escalona is carpet bombing the circuit with posters on every electric pole and radio advertisements averaging every few minutes. He claimed that his internal polls show him way ahead Castillero. Admittedly, Escalona appears strong, particularly with the 18-30 age group, which accounts for about 50% of the Azuero vote, according to Herrera's Electoral Tribunal Regional Director Hector Paulette.

¶14. (SBU) PRD Herrera elections coordinator Reynaldo Salerno reluctantly agreed with Escalona's confident assessment. According to both Arnulfista and PRD contacts, Arnulfista legislative candidates Escalona, Jose Luis "Popi" Varela and Carlos Afu are sure to win. Escalona and Salerno also agreed that one PRD candidate is a shoo-in. A fourth Arnulfista is a favorite for the region's fifth slot, and a coalition partner MOLIRENA challenger is in a close race for the sixth. Torrijos plans to fight back in the Azuero with several

scheduled visits in the campaign's remaining month, including a closing campaign rally.

15. (SBU) Arnulfista presidential hopeful Jose Miguel Aleman, according to his campaign manager Carlos Raul Piad, is counting on an apparent legislative "full house" to sweep him to victory in Herrera and Los Santos, where the electorate traditionally votes for the entire party slate. However, Aleman's registered party base (his floor) only accounts for about 20% of the Herrera electorate and 25% of the Los Santos electorate, slightly below the PRD's registered party base. Three of the Arnulfista legislative candidates have no political allegiance to Aleman (much less personal or professional scruples) and are not pushing supporters to vote for the top of their ticket. Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso has a personal stake in two of the Arnulfistas and has spent political capital on the third; however, her support for Aleman has been ineffective thus far. Many independent voters (about half of the Azuero electorate) are expected to vote Arnulfista for legislature but then vote Torrijos (or no one at all) for president.

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